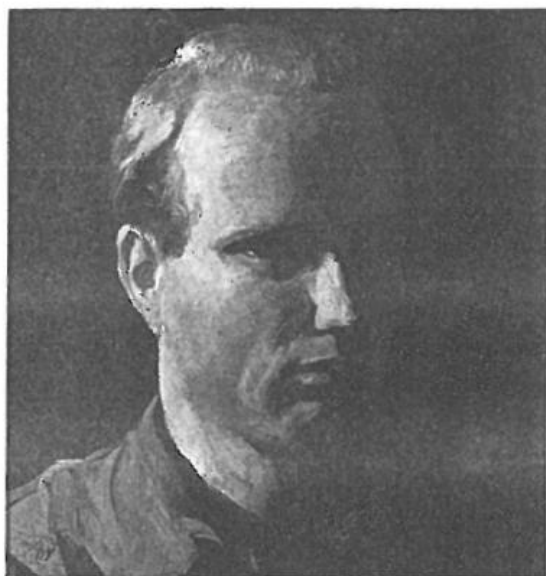
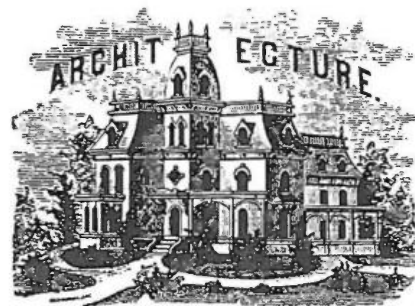


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Rockwell Kent
1882-1971

Rockwell Kent is a 20th century American cultural giant, justly celebrated for his work as a realist painter, graphic artist, author, world traveler, and political activist. Less thoroughly acknowledged is his work in architecture, the field in which he received his first formal training. In Maine, Kent was closely identified with Monhegan Island, where he

lived for many seasons, painted several of his best known landscapes and marines, and designed and built three cottages and his studio. Individually and as a group, these well constructed, sensitively situated structures are good examples of his design skills and assume a special place in the state's architectural fabric.

Kent was born in Tarrytown, New York, in 1882, the first of the three children of Rockwell and Sara Ann Holgate Kent. The Kents prided themselves on their lineage and gentility, but after the death of Rockwell, Sr. in 1887 they experienced hard times.¹

In spite of thin finances, Sara Kent insisted on the best education for Rockwell, Jr. When he reached the age of thirteen, he accompanied an artist aunt on a tour of European ceramic and porcelain factories.² At home he attended a local boarding school and went on to the Episcopal Academy of Connecticut in Cheshire (1893), the Horace Mann School in New York (1895), and summer school at Shinnecock, Long Island (1900), where he came under the influence of the noted artist William Merritt Chase.³ Chase offered young Kent a full scholarship to the New York School of Art, but Sara urged a more practical career. A compromise was reached when Rockwell won a scholarship to the School of Architecture at Columbia University.⁴ He commenced his studies in the autumn of 1900. Fridolf Johnson, an authority on Kent, has observed:

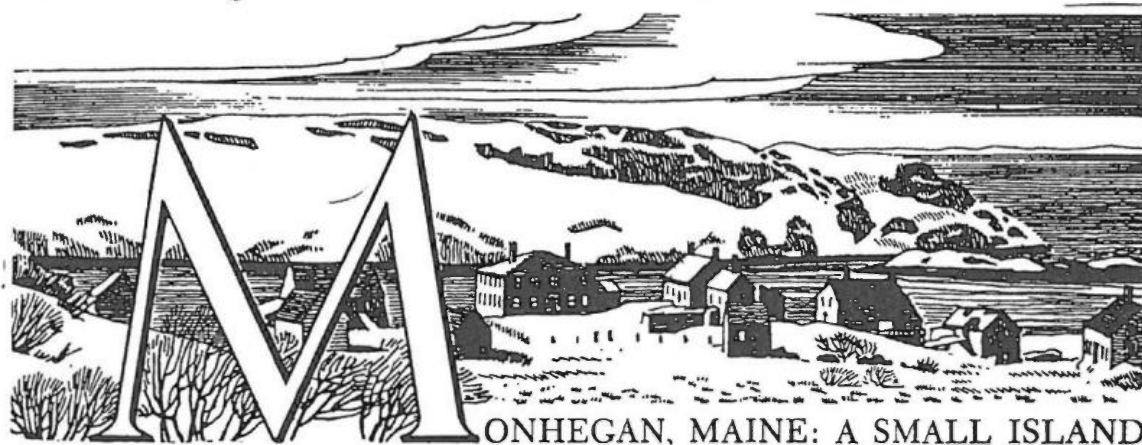


Figure 1. Sketch of Monhegan Island by Rockwell Kent from his autobiography *It's Me O Lord*, 1955 (MHPC).

At Columbia, Rockwell's natural aptitudes and strong competitive instincts brought marks often better than most of his classmates, but architectural rendering was really the only subject he could respond to with genuine feeling; it was more like painting, and above all he wanted to paint pictures. Predictably, in the middle of his fourth term he made up his mind once and for all, and went to see Chase about that scholarship.⁵

In his autobiography, Kent recalled his college days with some relish and in amusing detail. Of his teachers, he liked A.D.F. Hamlin the least and William R. Ware the best:

With what a twinkle in his eyes he would announce to us that he would try to make his lectures "interesting, instructive and amusing." And, by golly, he'd proceed to do so! All loved Professor Ware; all honored him. And the professor loved his students; and he *trusted* them. And of that trust our own rectitude in his classes was the reward.⁶

Kent's formal architectural training had more than a passing influence on his subsequent career. On one level it gave him a means of earning a living in times of financial distress. It also allowed him to design and build for himself and for his friends. Finally, his skill as a draftsman was to play a strong underlying role in his mature paintings.

Rockwell Kent's switch to the New York School brought him under the tutelage of some of America's finest painters, including Chase, Robert Henri, and Kenneth Hayes Miller. Thus began Kent's rise as a realist painter, a story that is particularly well documented by the artist and his many admirers.⁷

In 1903 Kent received a chance to use his architectural training. His mother gained an inheritance and decided to build a home in Tarrytown. Her son suggested Charles Ewing for the job. Ewing accepted

the commission and founded a new firm with George Chappell. Kent was the project's draftsman, and whenever he needed money in the course of the next decade, he was given work by the increasingly prosperous partnership of Ewing and Chappell.⁸

Kent's friend and painting teacher Robert Henri visited Maine and told his friends about Monhegan, a heavily forested, five hundred and thirty-one acre outcropping located ten miles off the coast (Figure 1). Kent went there in June of 1905, took work as a jack-of-all-trades, and remained through December.⁹ There were only about thirty buildings concentrated around the harbor. This rugged island was to become a home and source of inspiration for many years. The young artist viewed its landscape with the eyes of an architect, writing:

Unlike most New England villages, Monhegan has no plan, no straight, broad, elm-bordered avenue faced by the houses in their white-fenced yards; there was no avenue, there were no trees, there were no picket fences. No one had ever "laid out" Monhegan; it just grew. And past the random houses wandered a narrow road, a track worn there by the oxen of other days and now kept open by the one-horse, drop-axle wagon that was the island's sole conveyance.¹⁰

Even today, one looping road greets the "day tripper". There are a few trucks but no cars, and deeply worn paths connect the dooryards. In 1983 there were eighty-five year round residents, a number inflated to eight hundred and fifty by the summer influx of artists and tourists.¹¹

In the spring of 1906 Kent returned to the island and bought land for a cottage on Horn Hill from George Everett, an "artist turned speculator in real estate".¹² That was in April, but it was not until

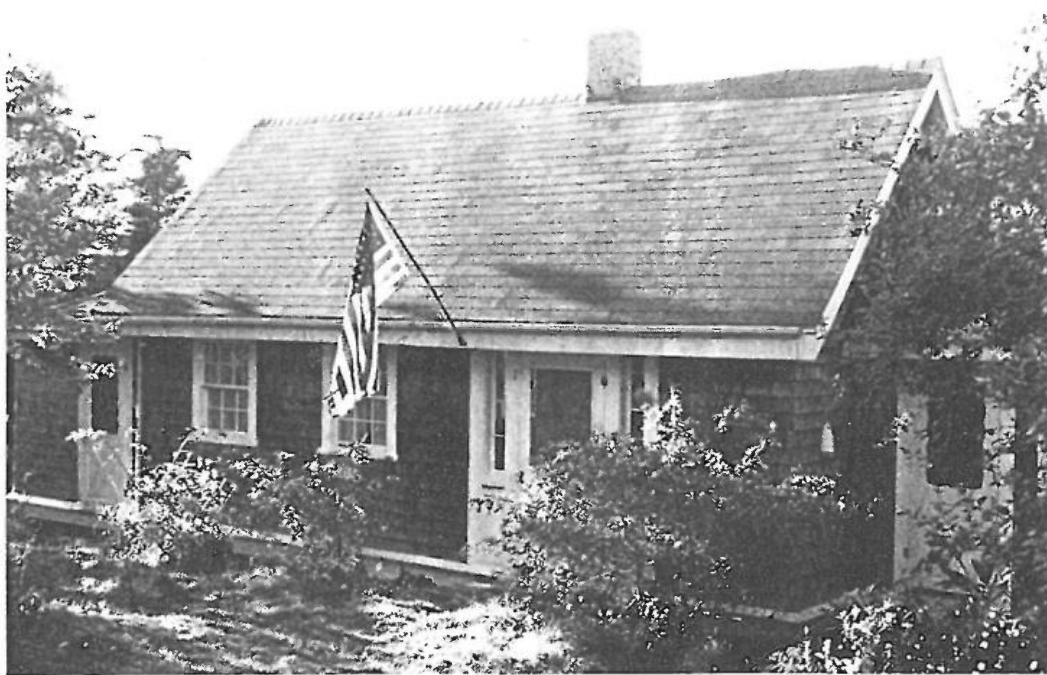


Figure 2. Rockwell Kent Cottage, Monhegan Island, 1986 view (MHPC).



Figure 3. Mary Kelsey Cottage, Monhegan Island, c. 1965 view (Courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Bruce Hausser).

January 12 of the following year that the deed was officially recorded.¹³ The site was chosen, Kent told the artist James Fitzgerald, so it would not "deface the virginal beauty of the hill."¹⁴ Because a local builder never appeared in the summer of 1906, Kent became his own carpenter:

The house originally had only one room with an iron cookstove vented through the fireplace and an attic bedroom above. The pump and privy were outside. A hallway and staircase, sunroom and kitchen were added later... Protected by Horn Hill, Lighthouse Hill, and Burnt Head, the house was exposed only to infrequent storms from the northwest which blew across the open meadow.¹⁵

Paying homage to the Maine vernacular tradition, Kent's cottage is a classic shingled half Cape with an ell addition on either side (Figure 2). The doorway, window, and cornice trim all reflect the influence of the Greek Revival. In both its style and its siting, the house was a sensitive and attractive addition to the island.

In March of 1907, Kent exhibited some of his best Monhegan paintings at New York's Clausen Galleries and was given favorable reviews. He returned in May or June of that year and was hired as the carpenter, though not the designer, for two new shingle style houses.¹⁶ Owned by Charles and Edwin Jenney, these structures did not please Kent, who later wrote:

I am to be remembered as having, with George Green, built the two most "modern" houses on the island—and incidentally, the two most hideous: the two Jenney Houses.¹⁷

Standing proudly above the harbor, they are actually rather handsome structures from the perspective of eighty years later.

At about this time, Kent designed and built the "Marigold Cottage" on Horn Hill for Mary Kelsey, a family friend:

...she and my mother had come to Monhegan to have a look at the fabulous island that had lured a son away from home. They liked the island, its woods and fields, its headlands and the surf that swirled about their base; they liked the people of Monhegan, and they liked my house. So Mary, buying a piece of land adjoining mine, commissioned me to design and build a house for her, like mine, but smaller.¹⁸

Although now extensively altered, the "Marigold Cottage" was originally a small shingled full Cape which featured a central doorway enframed by Federal pilasters (Figure 3). A large windowed bay projected from the right side of the facade. As with Kent's own house, the design and location of Mary Kelsey's summer home were responsive to Monhegan's environment.

In the spring of 1908, Kent planned and constructed what was to become his most ambitious and overtly placed residential structure on Monhegan. The Sara Kent Cottage, nestled on the rocks above Lobster Cove, was commissioned by his mother.¹⁹ (Figures 4 & 5) It is the most remote home on the island and among the most distinctive. In a letter to the present owner, painter Jamie Wyeth, Kent noted:

About the situation of the house, you will be interested to know that when I built it so very close to the sea I was warned by old Monheganers that it would never stand up against the stormy weather. But since there was grass growing in the scanty soil on that site, I was certain that the sea would never reach it. But for a year or two after I had built the house, I had nightmares over its being washed away and of myself swimming around in the wreckage.²⁰

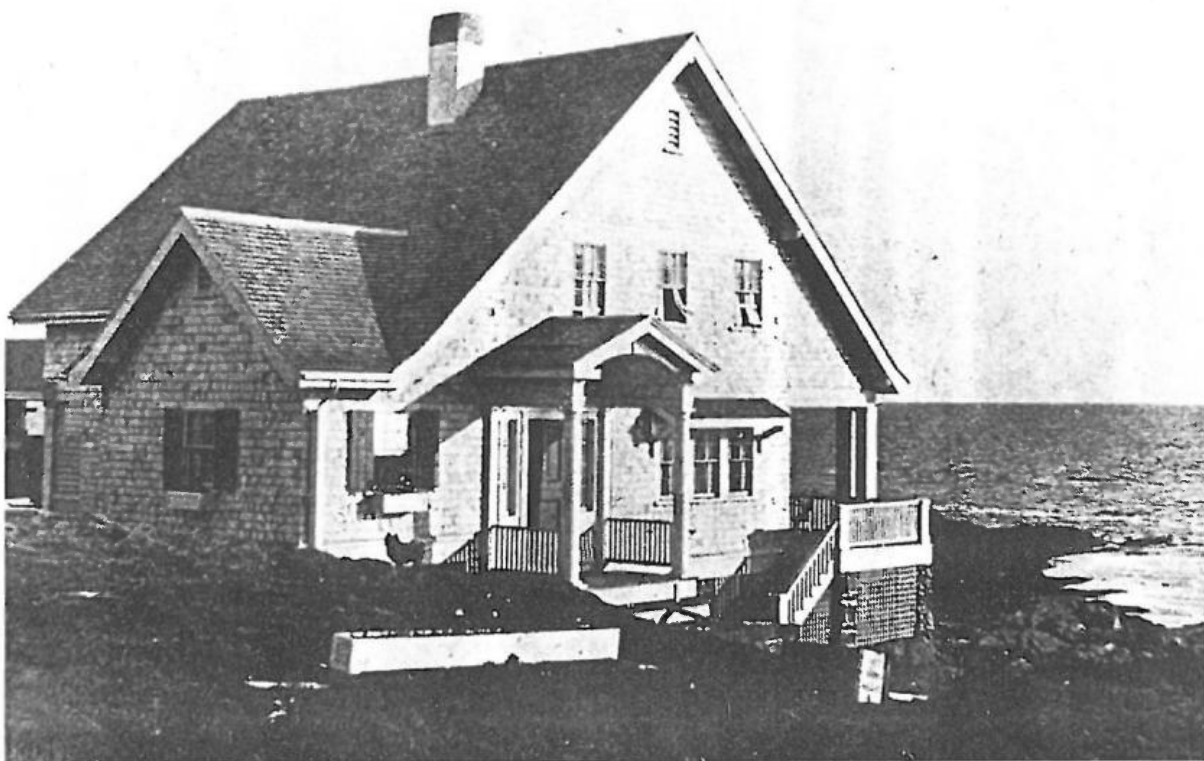


Figure 4. Sara Kent Cottage, Monhegan Island, 1908 view (Courtesy of Jamie Wyeth).



Figure 5. Sara Kent Cottage, Monhegan Island, 1986 view (MHPC).

Kent's fears were unfounded, for his mother's cottage has soundly withstood the elements for nearly eighty years. Design wise, Sara Kent's summer house reflects the later phase of the Shingle Style in which a large gable roof encompasses both the house and the front porch, the exterior is shingled, and architectural features such as the main entrance and the porch columns are Colonial Revival. A reference to the contemporary arts and crafts bungalow style is found in the roof overhang with its sparingly used brackets.

In the spring of 1909, Rockwell Kent returned to Monhegan to operate, with Julius Golz, The Monhegan Summer School of Art. Biographer David Traxel notes:

Rockwell's mother offered to pay for materials to build the school's studio if he did the work. He left for Monhegan in May, immediately set to work, and by mid-June, just as the students arrived, he had finished.²¹

The studio was Kent's final addition to the architectural fabric of the island community (Figure 6). Located on the low slope of Horn Hill overlooking the central meadow and the village, this simple Shingle Style structure was comprised of a large gable roofed studio with smaller attached sections to accommodate residential use. The present owner, Anne Hubert, provides the following description:

The building, fifteen hundred feet down the hill, is larger than the house. Besides a handsomely designed studio, it has a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. The window, facing north, is 18 x 12 feet and is constructed of 10 x 15 inch panes overlapping vertically without putty or adhesive, the long vertical strips held in place by narrow wooden mullions.²²

Together with the "Marigold Cottage" and Kent's own house on the hillside above, the studio combines to form an almost organic architectural grouping. These similarly scaled structures enhance rather than intrude on the surrounding countryside and blend in neatly when viewed from the village across the meadow.

Kent's remarkable career had just begun when he built the studio. His path would lead him to such places as Labrador, Alaska, and Greenland, not to mention homes in Vermont and upper New York state. In 1917 he sold the Monhegan cottage but in 1947 bought it back.²³ He and his third wife, Sally Kent Gorton, summered there through 1953. Until his death in 1971, Rockwell Kent retained a fondness for the island and corresponded with Jamie Wyeth who bought the Sara Kent Cottage.²⁴

Kent's primal images of Monhegan Island and the sea remain among the finest American works of the era. His buildings there are certainly a more modest

contribution, but they exhibit the same simplicity, directness, and integrity that characterizes all of Rockwell Kent's productions.

William David Barry
January, 1987

NOTES

- ¹ David Traxel, *An American Saga: The Life and Times of Rockwell Kent*, New York, 1980, pp. 6-7. Also see Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, New York, 1955, pp. 13-25.
- ² Richard V. West, et. al., "An Enkindled Eye"—*The Paintings of Rockwell Kent: A Retrospective Exhibition*, Santa Barbara, 1985, p. 9. From Fridolf Johnson's essay, "Rockwell Kent, The Restless".
- ³ Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, pp. 75-80.
- ⁴ Ibid., pp. 65-74. Also see Rockwell Kent, *This is My Own*, New York, 1940, pp. 75-84.
- ⁵ Fridolf Johnson, "Rockwell Kent, The Restless" in West, et. al., "An Enkindled Eye", p. 9.
- ⁶ Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, p. 66.
- ⁷ For the best color plate overview, see West, et. al., "An Enkindled Eye".
- ⁸ Traxel, *An American Saga*, pp. 24-25.
- ⁹ Ibid., pp. 29-32.
- ¹⁰ Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, p. 120.
- ¹¹ Charlotte Fardelmann, *Islands Down East*, Camden, 1980, p. 43.
- ¹² Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, pp. 131-33. Kent says that he began building about June, 1906.
- ¹³ Anne Hubert, Letter to Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., October 17, 1986, Maine Historic Preservation Commission files, Augusta.
- ¹⁴ Calvin Hennig, *James Fitzgerald*, Rockland, 1984, p. 85. Quoted from Rockwell Kent letter to James Fitzgerald, June 26, 1970.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 85.
- ¹⁶ Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, pp. 152-54.
- ¹⁷ Rockwell Kent, letter to Jacqueline Hudson, May 7, 1970. Collection of the Monhegan Museum.
- ¹⁸ Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, p. 140.
- ¹⁹ N.A., "Rockwell Kent and Monhegan Island", manuscript. The Monhegan Museum. Also see Traxel, *An American Saga*, pp. 39-41.
- ²⁰ Fridolf Johnson, ed., *Rockwell Kent, An Anthology of His Works*, New York, 1982, p. 239. Quoted from Rockwell Kent, letter to Jamie Wyeth, March 3, 1970.
- ²¹ Traxel, *An American Saga*, p. 49.
- ²² Anne Hubert, "Legacy of Beauty", n.p., n.d., p. 9.
- ²³ Jeff Clark, "The Return of Rockwell Kent", *Down East Magazine*, March, 1986, p. 28.
- ²⁴ Johnson, ed., *Rockwell Kent: An Anthology*, p. 239. Mr. Wyeth contributed the foreword to this volume.



Figure 6. Rockwell Kent Studio at the left, Monhegan Island, 1933 view (Courtesy of Monhegan Museum).

SOURCES

A great amount of literature has been written by or about Rockwell Kent. *It's Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York, 1955) is well written and filled with solid information, although it lacks an index. Also consulted was Kent's *This is My Own* (New York, 1940), a good, lesser autobiographical account. *Rockwell Kent, An Anthology of His Works*, edited by Fridolf Johnson (New York, 1982) is both beautiful and informative. The best biography is David Traxel's *An American Saga: The Life and Times of Rockwell Kent* (New York, 1980). In terms of a representative overview of his paintings, one turns to Richard V. West, et. al., *"An Enkindled Eye"—The Paintings of Rockwell Kent: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Santa Barbara, 1985), which includes important essays by Fridolf Johnson, Dan Burne Jones, and Richard V. West. Also useful is *Maine and Its Role in American Art, 1740-1963*, eds. Gertrud A. Mellon and Elizabeth

F. Wilder (New York, 1963), which treats Kent's local connection. Kent's cottage was later occupied by the painter James Fitzgerald, and that fact, along with photographs of the cottage and studio, are discussed in Calvin Hennig's *James Fitzgerald* (Rockland, 1984). Worth consulting is Jeff Clark's "The Return of Rockwell Kent", *Down East Magazine*, March, 1986. Key local manuscripts used included "Rockwell Kent and Monhegan Island," n.a., at the Monhegan Museum and Anne Hubert's "Legacy of Beauty", a copy of which was given to the author. On site assistance was provided by Julie and Jacqueline Hudson, whose warmth and enthusiasm made my research a success. The same interest brought the kind assistance of Edgar and Anne Hubert, owners of the Kent Cottage and Studio; Jamie Wyeth, owner of the Sara Kent Cottage; and Cynthia H. Krusell, curator of the Monhegan Museum.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ROCKWELL KENT

Self Portrait of Rockwell Kent, 1905
Courtesy of Plattsburgh State Art Galleries,
Rockwell Kent Gallery.

Rockwell Kent Cottage, Horn Hill, Monhegan, 1906, Extant.
"Marigold Cottage", Mary Kelsey Cottage, Horn Hill, Monhegan, c. 1907-08, Altered.
Sara Kent Cottage, Lobster Cove, Monhegan, 1908, Extant.
Rockwell Kent Studio, Horn Hill, Monhegan, 1909, Extant.

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